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## Developing Scholarly Identity: Variation in Agentive Responses to Supervisor Feedback

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# Developing Scholarly Identity: Variation in Agentive Responses to Supervisor Feedback

## **Abstract**

The central task for doctoral students, through the process of writing, feedback and revision, is to create a thesis that establishes their scholarly identity by situating themselves and their contribution within a field. This longitudinal study of two first-year doctoral students investigated the relationship between response to supervisor feedback on the thesis proposal and the development of scholarly identity (self-confidence, independence in research thinking, positioning the self in relation to others), through the lens of individual agency (self-assessing work, seeking and critically engaging with others' feedback in order to clarify research thinking). Data consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted over 3 months, different drafts of the research proposal, and written supervisor comments on the drafts. Narrative analysis and open coding were used to produce in-depth portraits of the individual experiences and perceptions of each participant. There were differences between the two individuals in their growing scholarly identities as regards their agency. The degree of agency exhibited in engaging critically with feedback in relation to self-assessment, and clarifying research thinking appeared linked to the development of the student's scholarly identity: her sense of confidence, scholarly independence in thinking, and positioning in relation to others. Such confidence and ownership in turn inspired greater agency. Interestingly, differences in the extent to which participants were agentive in relation to feedback appeared influenced by previous experiences with feedback. These results contribute a richer understanding of the relationship between use of supervisor feedback and growing scholarly independence.

## **Keywords**

scholarly identity, supervision, doctoral education, doctoral writing, feedback, agency

## Introduction

As aspiring scholars, doctoral students endeavour to enter the academic community by developing their research and writing abilities through completion of a thesis (Aitchison et al. 2010; Kamler & Thompson 2014). Composing the thesis, a process that involves writing, research, feedback and revision, allows students to learn to situate themselves as scholars (Wegener et al. 2014) and establish scholarly identity – a sense of independence as a researcher (Pearson & Brew 2002) located within a discipline and contributing to the body of literature.

However, given the intensity of doctoral work and the difficulty of transitioning from student to independent researcher, scholarly writing is often marked by an increase in anxiety in graduate students, who are just beginning to navigate both the disciplines and the institutions in which they are embedded (Lee & Boud 2003). Although many doctoral students have conducted research as master's students, the doctoral thesis is the first time they are asked to do research at such an in-depth and substantial level, making the doctoral thesis a novel learning task in many ways.

In writing the thesis, supervisor feedback is considered essential to making adequate and timely progress, and in encouraging scholarly growth (Kamler & Thomson 2014; Murakami-Ramalho et al. 2011). Yet, while previous studies have investigated the communication and reception of supervisor feedback, and what types of feedback students find useful, few studies have addressed how supervisor feedback is related to the development of scholarly identity, particularly early on in doctoral work. Thus, this study focuses on transfer of status or upgrade, which is the first step towards completing the thesis in most UK doctoral programs. Transfer of status is similar to the proposal defence in North America, except that the supervisor is not involved in the assessment process. Students typically are expected to apply for transfer of status after the first year of doctoral work, and must receive a successful evaluation to proceed to doctoral candidature.<sup>1</sup> Because supervisor feedback has the formative possibility to help clarify the doctoral student's initial research ideas in revisions of the transfer paper, the purpose of this study was to explore the *relationship between variations in engagement to supervisor feedback on transfer-related writing and the development of scholarly identity*. We chose to do this by examining identity development through the framework of identity-trajectory, with a focus on individuals' sense of agency (McAlpine, Amundsen & Turner 2013).

## Agency and identity-trajectory

Identity-trajectory approaches identity development through the lens of variation in agency as regards engagement in academic work (McAlpine, Amundsen & Turner 2013). Agency represents *efforts to work towards personally chosen goals, and deal with challenges*. In relation to writing and supervisor feedback, agentive behaviours include self-assessing work, engaging critically with feedback to clarify research thinking and seeking feedback from various sources. Affect –emotion – also plays a role in agency, in that it influences both one's approach to the world and response to it, including one's desire to invest in or avoid certain activities or relationships. In other words, individuals vary in the extent to which they perceive themselves as agentive in different contexts.

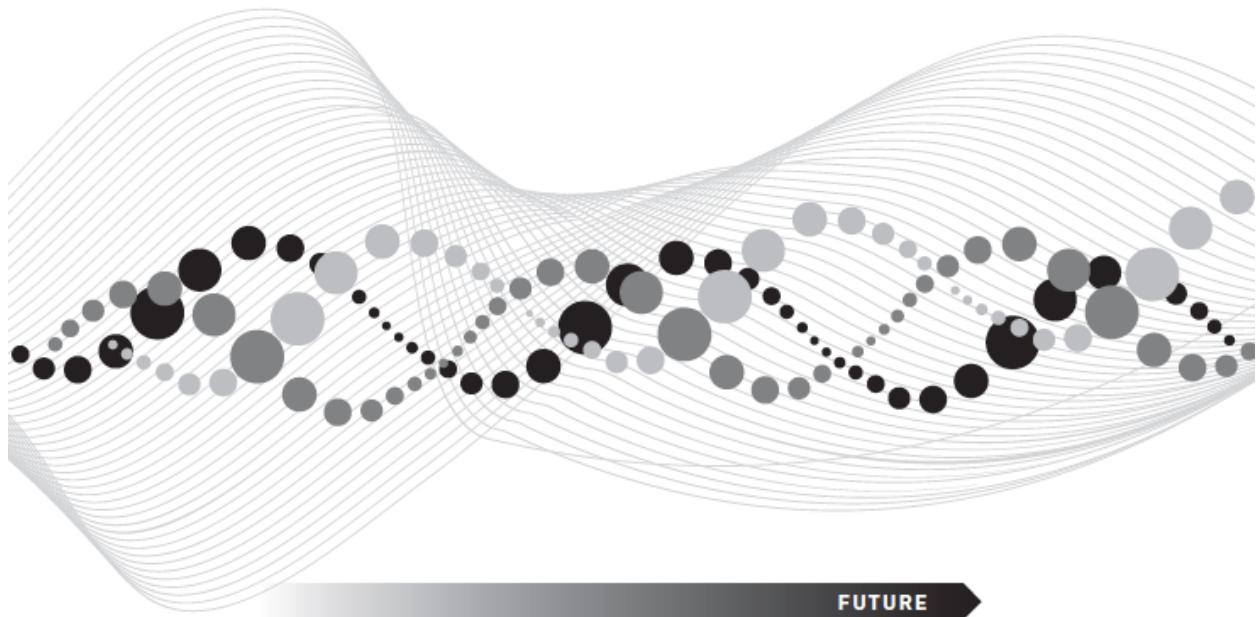
In becoming part of the academy, identity-trajectory understands scholarly identity development as enacted in three interwoven work strands: intellectual, networking and institutional (McAlpine,

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<sup>1</sup> Assessment criteria require the student to demonstrate they can “construct an argument, can present material in a scholarly manner, has a viable subject to work on, and can be reasonably expected to complete it in three to four years” (University of Oxford 2016, p. 2).

Amundsen & Turner 2013). The intellectual strand refers to how the student seeks to contribute to the body of work in their field through different forms of communication, including the thesis, published papers and conference presentations. The networking strand is composed of the peer and other academic networks the student builds and draws on for support (interpersonal networks), as well as the inter-textual networks – the literature – that the student engages with and uses to inform their own research thinking. The institutional strand focuses on the student's active engagement with both institutional obligations, in this case, completing the thesis proposal within expected timelines, and institutional resources like supervisors, libraries and seminars to advance their goals.

Identity-trajectory also places special emphasis on prior experience, specifically on how the past influences present and future intentions. Thus, identity-trajectory views are not static, but constantly evolving in response to the individual's changing goals and experiences. To understand how individuals vary in the degrees to which they are agentive in furthering their sense of scholarly identity, one must recognise the personal histories and specific contexts in which the individual is embedded. In short, students can be more or less agentive in the networking, intellectual and institutional strands of their developing scholarly identity. Figure 1 illustrates the interconnectedness of the three strands of identity-trajectory across time.



**Figure 1. Identity-trajectory: Three strands of work experience embedded within and influenced by an individual's life course**

From the perspective of identity-trajectory, how the student chooses to engage with supervisor feedback (an institutional resource) in developing the research project is a key site of inquiry, as the development of the doctoral proposal and thesis, which create the intellectual contribution that demonstrates a growing scholarly identity, are arguably the most central institutional responsibility of doctoral work. . Likewise, whether the student seeks alternate sources of feedback and what the

student chooses to read contribute to both the thesis and the student's understanding of their place within the academy. Thus, the ways students seek out and critically engage with suggestions, for instance, demonstrate how students can actively build their identities in the scholarly community as they develop confidence and independence in their research thinking, and position the self in relation to others. This study then explores in more depth how the research on writing can be framed within students' agentive engagement with the three strands of identity-trajectory: intellectual, networking and institutional.

## **Writing, research thinking, and identity work**

Over the past two decades, ample research has recognised the development of scholarly identity as a process of becoming located within a discipline and institution based on one's research contribution; this encompasses the activities associated with being a teacher, researcher, writer, administrator, etc. (Clarke, Hyde & Drennan 2013; Lieff et al. 2012; Murakami-Ramalho, Militello & Piert 2013). Evidence of scholarly growth includes greater confidence in one's work and a greater critical perspective (Murakami-Ramalho et al. 2011), the development of one's technical vocabulary and interaction with networks within the chosen field to achieve a sense of belonging (Lieff et al. 2012) and position oneself in relation to others, thus adding to the larger conversation through one's research (Cameron, Nairn & Higgins, 2009; Pare 2011). In other words, prior work suggests that one forum for scholarly growth lies in writing (Kamler & Thomson 2014), such as the doctoral thesis.

In other words, through writing, individuals clarify their ideas about the project as a whole. Further, since one of the major goals of doctoral study is to produce independent scholars (Pearson & Brew 2002), writing can be understood as a process of becoming independent in the ability to critique, argue and position oneself in relation to others. Writing initially involves clarifying research thinking and generating ideas, and later "integrat[ing] different parts of their work" when completing the final draft of the thesis (Phillips 1982, p. 172). Thus, academic writing involves the synthesis of a sense of identity and confidence as a writer (Ivanic 1998, 2004; Kamler & Thomson 2014; Lea & Stierer 2011), with a focus on putting a particular stamp on the text (Thomson & Kamler 2016), thereby positioning the self as a legitimate voice with a contribution to make (Cameron et al. 2009). In other words, writing is the tangible representation of an individual's research thinking and identity as a scholar.

Thus, from the perspective of identity-trajectory, the thesis and related research represent the student's potential intellectual contribution, since they are regarded as principally the work of the student. The student must be agentive in developing and owning the research thinking and how it is represented in the text, and work on the thesis constitutes development of the intellectual strand of identity-trajectory.

## **The role of feedback: Encouraging self-assessment and research thinking**

Agency is evident in the networking strand of identity-trajectory in the extent to which doctoral students intentionally develop and use a network of support to help further their research ideas, which are then represented in the text. One such source of support is supervisor feedback, a key institutional resource and important means of achieving the student's institutional responsibility for timely completion.

Feedback is understood as “information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one’s performance or understanding” (Hattie & Timperley 2007, p.81). Feedback creates or highlights what the assessor considers a “gap” between the quality of student work and the target level defined by the assessor – which students may mitigate by seeking out and addressing comments, and by learning to detect issues in their work through self-assessment (Hattie & Timperley 2007). Much evidence of this link exists at the undergraduate level.

Previous research suggests that self-regulation and self-assessment are important components of writing development and performance (Cho, Cho & Hacker 2010), and that teachers may encourage self-assessment by asking students to evaluate their work (Nichol 2010). For doctoral students, there is evidence that peer writing groups may be useful in encouraging self-assessment as students learn to position themselves by collectively building identities as writers and peer reviewers, and sharing experiences in pursuit of the common goal of producing quality writing (Aitchison & Lee 2006; Lee & Boud 2003). This notion of self-assessment is also central in understanding the role of agency in research development. The way students evaluate their work, interpret and assess supervisor feedback and make appropriate revisions is representative of the agentive nature of scholarly growth.

At the doctoral level, much of the research on feedback has focused on that between the supervisor and supervisee, because it is under the supervisor’s purview that the student shapes a thesis. Specifically, doctoral students’ supervisory needs most frequently include writing, research plans and process, institutional issues and disciplinary and academic practices (McAlpine & McKinnon 2012). Prior work on supervisor feedback has focused primarily on classifying types of feedback (Kumar & Stracke 2007; Basturkmen et al. 2014). Such studies have examined the linguistic functions of comments (Kumar & Stracke 2007) as well as trends in the substantive content of feedback (Basturkmen et al. 2014) and how graduate students view different types of feedback – what is perceived as most useful, and what is not (Kumar & Stracke 2007; Basturkmen et al. 2014). Supervisor feedback may support changes in research thinking and scholarly development in doctoral students by introducing the student to new literature, methodologies or possible theoretical frameworks (Kwan 2009), and posing reflective questions that prompt students to reevaluate their work (Ghazal et al. 2014).

### **Responses to feedback: Emotion and experience**

Because identity-trajectory takes into account the role of prior experience in shaping present and future intentions and perspectives, past experiences with writing play an important part in shaping how students respond to feedback. In other words, in becoming a PhD student, individuals bring with them a long history of experience with feedback on text. These varied experiences provide the context in which they respond to feedback in the doctoral context.

Research suggests that writing the thesis can be an emotional journey of highs and lows. Feedback that challenges a doctoral student’s thinking and actions can lead to negative emotional responses, which may subsequently affect self-efficacy, particularly in students with little practice giving and receiving feedback (Can & Walker 2011; Caffarella & Barnett 2010; Carlino 2012). Part of moving from student to independent researcher (Aitchison & Lee 2006; Aitchison et al. 2012) is learning to value challenging feedback as a mechanism to enhance one’s thinking. In this shift, giving and receiving feedback comes to be seen as a collaborative process requiring skill and cooperation from both supervisor and student, involving student regulation of the emotions

associated with revision and writing. In other words, a significant aspect of responding to supervisory feedback is learning to negotiate criticism in productive ways (Li & Seale 2007).

Students who lose motivation and self-confidence as a result of negative feedback may also refrain from seeking feedback (Can & Walker 2011), while those who are less affected by criticism are more likely to actively seek feedback from multiple sources (Can & Walker 2011) and critically review their own writing (Kumar & Stracke 2007). Likewise, students who are motivated and focused on improvement tend to question feedback and exhibit greater confidence in their research ideas (Can & Walker 2010). Students with greater self-efficacy may also be more likely to justify their revisions and decisions not to follow all supervisor suggestions, thereby exhibiting agentive decision-making (Caffarella & Barnett 2010).

## The study

This study was guided by the following research question:

- How do engagement with supervisor feedback and revision decisions about the transfer paper reflect and facilitate the development of scholarly identity?

While prior research has demonstrated that writing is a major site of scholarly identity development, and that doctoral students acquire self-assessment skills and gain confidence in their scholarly identities through giving and receiving feedback in peer groups, there is limited research that examines the role of supervisor feedback in this identity development, particularly in the early stages of doctoral work. Given this context, this study investigated the extent to which two first-year doctoral students demonstrated *greater or lesser agency in their responses to supervisor feedback* on their transfer papers, and how this process *was related to the development of their scholarly identities*. We looked specifically at their evaluation and use of supervisor feedback, assessment of their own work and clarification of research thinking in connection to growing confidence and positioning of the self in relation to others.

We focused on two students because we wanted to pilot a different conceptual framework (which we have described earlier) and a different methodological approach to understanding the role of supervisor feedback. Much previous inquiry has used thematic analysis that looks across individuals. Instead, we chose a longitudinal narrative approach that centers on the individual as the focus of analysis (Elliott 2005), and tends to use low numbers of participants given the large data sets generated for each. The strength of narrative is that it permits the researcher to look for individual differences—in our case, in agency and scholarly development. Further, incorporating a longitudinal, multi-modal approach (see below) meant we could triangulate different data sources in developing a rich understanding of growing scholarly identity. Similar studies that examine in-depth feedback practices at the doctoral level have also used small sample sizes of one to three; ultimately, “the appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is one that adequately answers the research question” (Marshall & Rossman 1995).

## Methods

### *Participants*

Participants were two first-year doctoral students, “Sarah” and “Isabelle”, studying education at the University of Oxford.<sup>2</sup> They were recruited via email advertisement and oral announcement made by the Graduate Program Director. Announcements were made in class twice over three weeks during the doctoral research seminar, followed by an email that included the researchers’ contact information and details of the study. Two students responded out of a possible 21 full-time, first-year doctoral students. The small population, the time-consuming nature of this study and the possibility that not all students had made sufficient progress on their papers likely explains this response rate. The literature suggests that in studies involving in-depth qualitative interviews, there is no minimum number of participants; rather, the question is whether there is “sufficiency” of information to reflect a range of experiences, without having “oversaturation” (redundancy) (Seidman 2006, p.55). The two participants who responded held very different perspectives and prior experiences. Further, the narrative approach of this study rendered a small sample appropriate, as described above.

### *Research design*

Once the project had received ethics approval, data was collected in the following manner. Each participant was interviewed after meeting with her supervisor, capturing the experience of three or four consecutive supervision sessions from mid-February through May 2016. This was in line with departmental policy that students can expect to meet with their supervisors once per month. Supervisors were not notified that their students were participating in the research.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and occurred either in person at agreed times and locations, or via Skype, depending on the participants’ travel schedules. Interviews focused on the students’ writing and feedback histories, their responses to supervisor feedback on the transfer paper, plans for revision and perspectives on their research progress.<sup>3</sup> Questions were drafted and revised based on input from both authors of this study, and were informed by the literature. Prior to each interview, the students’ notes, written supervisor feedback and drafts of the transfer paper were collected and reviewed. All interviews were recorded and manually transcribed.

### *Data analysis*

The data was analysed using a combination of narrative analysis and open coding. Narrative analysis involves examining the data in a holistic way, viewing the texts as a whole (Riessman 2008). To understand each participant’s experience, interviews, student notes and drafts of the transfer paper were narratively analysed. These analyses took place at two different times and had two different purposes: 1) to produce cameos representing each participant’s writing and feedback history, doctoral research project and supervisory patterns *at the start of this study*; and 2) later to produce summaries that demonstrated how each participant situated the *writing-feedback-revision process* within the period of the study, and how that *process affected the extent of her identification as an academic*.

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<sup>2</sup> This research was conducted while the first author was a master’s student at the University of Oxford. The co-author of this paper was her supervisor. Although both participants were also members of the Department of Education, they rarely, if ever, encountered the author outside of set meeting times, and they did not know each other before the start of this research.

<sup>3</sup> The interview protocol can be obtained from the authors.

Next, trends in each participant's interpretation of feedback were identified via open coding of interview transcripts. Open coding, also referred to as emergent coding, is a common method in qualitative analysis for classifying and interpreting data (Creswell 2013). Through this process, five major themes were identified – agency, experience, emotion, personal networking, supervisory patterns – which related to how the participants interpreted supervisor feedback, decided what feedback to incorporate and subsequently viewed their research projects. Using the tools in MaxQDA 12, including the code-relations browser, the summary grid and segment retrieval, the data were further analysed for patterns. Quotes from interviews that illustrated the participants' thinking processes in taking up feedback and making decisions about revision were also identified. The results of these analyses formed the basis for the narrative summaries (noted above) that represented the complete experience of each participant in relation to the research questions. All coding was separately reviewed by the co-authors of this paper, and were clarified and refined through discussion, codes, definitions and interpretations.<sup>4</sup>

## Results and discussion

This study set out to answer the following research question: How do engagement with supervisor feedback and revision decisions about the transfer paper reflect and facilitate the development of scholarly identity?

The results below describe how two first-year doctoral students displayed varying levels of agency in responding to feedback within the three strands of identity-trajectory. Despite the contrast in their approaches to supervisor feedback, both participants advanced their scholarly identities by using and evaluating feedback on their transfer papers. Given our narrative approach, we begin with two cameos to introduce Sarah's and Isabelle's experiences of writing and feedback.

### *Sarah*

Sarah was a first-year doctoral student whose research focused on using digital technologies to teach modern history at the secondary level in England. Prior to the doctoral program, Sarah had completed two master's degrees in history. As a non-native English speaker, she had concerns about her ability to express herself in English and appreciated feedback on language.

In the past, Sarah had had negative experiences with school and feedback. As an adolescent, she took criticism personally, a problem that was exacerbated by comments from teachers that went beyond assessing her work to issuing judgements about her ability as a student. After completing her bachelor's degree and a thesis under an influential supervisor, Sarah learned to separate herself from criticism. At the time of this study, she had generally learned to temper her emotional response towards feedback.

Sarah began working on her transfer paper in October 2015, shortly after starting the doctoral program, and planned to submit in September 2016. Her thesis was guided by two female co-supervisors. Sarah met with her "core supervisor" four or five times per term, and with both supervisors once per term. At each supervision, Sarah and her supervisor(s) took notes. Sarah's notes focused on her supervisors' suggestions for revision, and sources of further reading. Following each meeting, Sarah typed her notes and uploaded them to a forum containing a "trail" of both her and her supervisors' notes, resulting in an archive reflecting the various topics they

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<sup>4</sup> A list of codes can be obtained from the authors.

discussed. She also received in-text written comments on the first draft of her literature review in the form of tracked changes and comments in a Word document.

In February, when Sarah's first interview took place, she was in the early stages of developing her research project, and the major evidence of her work was represented in a basic outline of her research proposal that she submitted in December 2015 for the Research Training Seminar. Over the next few months, Sarah drafted and revised her literature review, and discussed with her supervisors two possible avenues for her research design. She also drafted the transfer document, which contained the major elements of her transfer paper, including research purpose, research questions, theoretical framework and methods.

### *Isabelle*

Isabelle was a first-year doctoral student conducting research on the demand for higher education from refugees in a developing country. English was her second language,<sup>5</sup> which she mastered as an undergraduate in the US. Isabelle enjoyed writing, which she had taught for a total of five years. Thus, she was familiar with giving and receiving feedback. As a master's student, Isabelle also started her own freelance research business, which grew out of various research projects she had worked on for her professors.

Isabelle had one supervisor (male), with whom she had formal meetings with every few weeks; however, they often met informally, having brief conversations about readings or particular aspects of her research. Before each formal meeting, Isabelle emailed her supervisor an agenda outlining the topics she wanted to discuss. During the supervision, Isabelle took notes on her laptop, which consisted of questions her supervisor posed, questions she asked herself as a result of their discussion and aspects of her paper or research project that needed further elaboration or reworking. Her supervisor also drew figures to visually represent parts of her research project, which Isabelle kept as inspiration when revising her paper. Like Sarah, Isabelle generally did not receive written feedback, but did receive brief handwritten comments on one draft of her transfer paper, which her supervisor made while they were both traveling and unable to meet in person.

Isabelle began working on her transfer paper in October 2015, shortly after beginning the doctoral program. At the time of her first interview in March 2016, she had a nearly complete draft of her transfer paper, and hoped to expand the section on theoretical framework and fine-tune her methodology. Over the course of our meetings, which spanned March to May 2016, she continued to develop her research plan and transfer paper by piloting her instruments, reading and revising her research questions and research design.

Isabelle also participated in a peer-writing group. Since her peers were unfamiliar with her research topic, they were able to point out gaps in logic and places that required additional context, which she found very helpful. Isabelle submitted her transfer application on the day of her final interview.

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<sup>5</sup> Although both participants were non-native English speakers, both had previously completed degrees in the English language and demonstrated high-level language skills. Isabelle noted her own English proficiency by admitting that she rarely comes across words that she does not know in her readings. Sarah was less confident in her language skills and appreciated linguistic feedback from her supervisors, but did note that she had no trouble comprehending the language. Thus, while language should be considered in work on writing, feedback and supervision, in this study the participants' language background appeared to have little effect on how they understood and responded to feedback.

### *Experience, emotion, and perception of feedback*

Identity-trajectory emphasises the role of agency and the influence of individual context in understanding present intentions and emotions (McAlpine & Amundsen 2013). The results of the narrative analysis suggest that both Isabelle's and Sarah's responses to feedback reflected their prior experience, demonstrating how doctoral work is an emotional journey in which students eventually establish independence and scholarly identity. The results further suggest that both participants had different experiences of feedback, and that negative emotional experiences may be particularly formative in shaping overall perceptions of and responses to feedback, as well as variations in confidence and scholarly independence.

For example, as a teenager Sarah struggled with critical feedback, viewing negative comments from her teachers as "a mark on my person". As a result, there were a number of instances where Sarah discussed emotion, experience and feedback together, suggesting that her perception of feedback continued to be shaped by her past, even though she had learned to temper her negative emotional reactions over time.

In contrast, Isabelle, who had had positive writing experiences, appreciated criticism and maintained a positive attitude toward feedback. While she viewed positive comments as affirming that certain parts of her transfer paper were "good", she preferred critical feedback, which she described as "constructive". Isabelle explained, "I mean it's nice to hear... 'oh, this is awesome' or 'this is really interesting', but it doesn't do anything for my actual work because then I just end up being left to my own devices again." She appreciated critical feedback because it raised questions and identified issues in her writing, assumptions and research design, driving the paper forward and aiding in her desire to improve. Isabelle's work as a writing teacher also contributed to this perspective, and reflected her ability to recognise that feedback is not personal: "[My teaching experience] made me less...vulnerable to criticism because having given a lot of constructive or critical feedback...I know...you're commenting on the work and...not...about your ability as a researcher." This is consistent with findings by Caffarella and Barnett (2010), who concluded that with more experience, students have fewer negative emotional reactions to scholarly writing and feedback. These findings also support the literature on peer writing groups that suggests that participating in writing groups advance graduate students' confidence and familiarity with giving and receiving feedback (Aitchison & Lee 2006).

### *Writing, identity, and responses to feedback: Variations in agency*

The results of the open coding suggest that the participants' engagement with feedback was both evidence of variation in agentive decision-making and related to their confidence as growing scholars. This aligns with Caffarella and Barnett's (2010) finding that self-efficacy, an aspect of agency, was tied to students' ability to justify their revisions and decisions to ignore or reject supervisor feedback. The results also suggest that engagement with feedback, self-assessment and clarifying of thinking are related to growing scholarly identity, though in different ways for each individual. By agentively engaging with feedback to revise their proposals, the participants began to: 1) solidify their understanding of the research process and where their research fit into the field; and 2) gain greater confidence in their research and writing skills – key evidence of scholarly growth. These findings are consistent with prior work by Murakami-Ramalho et al. (2011) and Lieff et al. (2012).

Both participants showed evidence of scholarly growth within the framework of identity-trajectory in ways that reflected their prior experiences and subsequent perceptions of feedback. Isabelle sought feedback from members of her network who were independent of her supervisor. She also actively engaged in feedback, evaluating comments and embracing those that caused her to think

about her research in different ways, thereby influencing the shape of her intellectual contribution – the transfer paper – and demonstrating a growing scholarly identity. In contrast, Sarah used only the institutional resource of supervisor feedback to further her understanding of the research process and practices within scholarly writing for the social sciences, largely accepting and incorporating her supervisor's feedback without evaluation, since her supervisor was perceived as more expert. The differences in agency evident in the participants' developing strands of scholarly identity-trajectory may be understood by looking more closely at their individual experiences and perceptions.

Isabelle's use of the institutional resource of supervisor feedback was highly agentive, as she questioned and evaluated supervisor comments throughout the writing and revision process. Isabelle's interview transcripts revealed about *twice as many statements* as Sarah's about her confidence and ownership of her project, indicating a well-developed sense of scholarly identity. Instances of agency were also reflected via self-assessment, purposeful decision-making and the ability to critically evaluate supervisor feedback. For example, when asked whether her supervisor provided feedback that she disagreed with, Isabelle responded by positioning herself as different from him:

*Yes, he does, all the time. But I usually tell him.... [H]e's a very quantitative person so his research is very much about, um, quantifying even qualitative data.... And I know that that's not really going to work in this context. And I'll...tell him...I want to do a more qualitative approach. I want...embeddedness, more – all these different things. Um, and he doesn't have a problem with that, at least I don't, I don't think he does. So we very often have conversations about this...I'll tell him that oh, no I don't want that to be my thesis, I don't want my thesis to be like this....*

As demonstrated above, when Isabelle disagreed with a suggestion, she discussed it with her supervisor, implying high levels of confidence and self-efficacy. These results align with Can and Walker's (2010) finding that students who were positive and motivated to improve tended to defend their ideas and question feedback. That said, Isabelle also recognised when feedback was valuable, using it at these times to critically assess her work and further clarify her research thinking. For example, she said:

*[My supervisor] also reminded me that everything has to be problematized...so even things that you haven't necessarily thought about, you have to go through and try to make questions out of everything because you're automatically...making assumptions.... That was actually a really good...exercise to do, and so I've gone through...my transfer and starting looking for every single assumption I might be making....*

This ability to evaluate and respond to feedback was also evident in the textual revisions Isabelle made to her transfer paper (Table 1). For instance, Isabelle's supervisor identified an issue with her third research question, noting that the available numerical data were insufficient to warrant a quantitative research focus. In explaining her supervisor's comment and her decision to remove the research question, Isabelle said, "if I was able to gather numbers from last six or seven years..."

then I could look at the numbers and look for trends.... But to have that as part of my research problem, or research questions, doesn't make sense." Isabelle recognised the validity of the comment, acknowledging that given the limited data it would not be prudent to focus on refugee student demand for higher education as a research question, and that it would make more sense to include it as "a kind of foundation" for her project. Her supervisor suggested emphasising the qualitative aspect of her study – interviewing refugees – which Isabelle described as a "shift of focus", but not as a change to the methodology; she had already intended to conduct interviews. This response manifested in a revised version of her research questions. Research question 3 was removed, and research questions 1 and 2 maintained a clear qualitative focus.

These revisions provide textual evidence of how supervisor feedback influenced the direction of Isabelle's research project, while her commentary demonstrates how her supervisor's comment triggered a response that led to developing thought about her research – evidence of change in research thinking and subsequent scholarly growth.

Table 1. Isabelle: Revision example

| Original text  | Supervisor feedback   | Student commentary  | Revised text   |
|--|---|---|--|
| <p><b>RQ1:</b> What is the <b>existing provision</b> of higher education to refugees in [the country], including on site delivery, online courses, integration into [the country's] higher-education system (private and public), and study abroad scholarships?</p> <p><b>RQ2:</b> What are the possibilities for <b>expanding provision</b> of higher education to refugees in [the country]?</p> <p><b>RQ3:</b> What is the <b>demand</b> for higher education among refugee students in [the country]? How many refugees have applied, or wish to apply, to higher-education programs or scholarship schemes, and what are the characteristics of those who apply (e.g. age, gender)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What is the nature of the demand for higher-education in terms of courses applied for, motivations for pursuing higher</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Don't like the numbers issue</li> <li>▪ Need more number</li> <li>▪ Trend data: 2010 – 2011 – 2012 – 2013 – 2014 – 2015 – 2016 – 2017</li> <li>▪ One thing you might look at: decline in trend, more refugees accessing public institutions as opposed to private, look at proportion of total of refugee population.</li> <li>▪ Does this data exist?!</li> </ul> | <p>[T]his is referring to...the quant part of my study, because part of what I want to do...is look at how many is currently accessing education...[a]nd what the theoretical capacity is for universities to absorb refugee students.... [H]e said, that he'd been thinking about that and although it makes sense as kind of like a foundation, it doesn't make sense as a research question because if you're gonna work with numbers, you need a lot more.... For example...if I was able rather to gather numbers from last six or seven years or something, then I could look at the numbers and look for trends.... Because that data doesn't exist...he then suggested that I should focus more on the qualitative direction.</p> | <p><b>RQ1:</b> Which modes and types of higher-education delivery are best suited to long-term refugees?</p> <p><b>RQ2:</b> What are the <i>potential benefits of expanding</i> higher education to [<i>a country's</i>] refugees in [the country], <i>from the perspective of</i>(1) <i>refugee youth</i>, (2) <i>[the country]</i> <i>authorities</i>, (3) <i>actors from</i> [the country's] <i>labor market</i>, (4) <i>the UNHCR and partners</i>, and (5) <i>international organizations involved in higher-education provision to refugees</i>?</p> |

|                                    |  |  |
|------------------------------------|--|--|
| education, and future aspirations? |  |  |
|------------------------------------|--|--|

Finally, Isabelle drew on a variety of interpersonal networks, including her peer group, for support and critique, while also expanding her inter-textual network via reading suggestions from her supervisor and self-identified texts relevant to her study. Isabelle's involvement in a peer writing group further illustrated her willingness to seek feedback from multiple sources and not rely solely on her supervisor's assessment, which is consistent with findings that students who are less negatively affected by criticism are more likely to seek feedback from multiple sources (Can & Walker 2010). Isabelle's agentive engagement within all three strands of identity-trajectory demonstrate her strong sense of scholarly goals, as well as how she continued to grow as a researcher. Thus, Isabelle made clear that while she valued her supervisor's feedback, she owned and felt confident in the research, and her positioning in relation to others. In other words, Isabelle's agentive engagement with feedback reflected her strong and growing sense of scholarly identity.

In contrast, Sarah was less agentive in her use of supervisor feedback, viewing her supervisors as "professional[s]" who "know more". This aligns to some extent with McAlpine and McKinnon's (2013) finding that one rationale for seeking supervisory support is a perception of the supervisor as expert. Analysis of Sarah's interview transcripts indicated that she perceived supervisor comments as directive and used feedback primarily for planning, meaning that she had a vision for her research but was uncertain as to how she wanted to shape that vision into a concrete project; she relied on supervisor feedback for guidance. In this way, she demonstrated her approach toward feedback as one of acceptance rather than critical assessment. She subsequently showed less confidence and independence, and continued to struggle with positioning herself in relation to others, indicating that her sense of scholarly identity was still evolving. In describing the revision process, Sarah said, "I started from [the] first correction...and remade the things following [my supervisor's] suggestions, and the things took the shape that she wanted, that I assumed was the correct shape." Note here the reference to "correct", the sense that there can be a right and wrong way of thinking about research.

In another instance, one of Sarah's supervisions focused on possible avenues for her research design. In the passage below, Sarah reiterated the main points of the conversation, providing an example of "planning" – using supervisor feedback to structure the next steps in the research project:

*Around this big gap [in the literature] there are two routes.... One is to explore...how these digital resources are used in schools...and how they can be helped. And there is another route, which is...design something that can be used.... After I...finish the lit review I will talk with...two [or] three people [and] I think that things will be clearer.... It's about what is...feasible and what is not.*

From this excerpt it is evident that following discussion with her supervisors, Sarah had a clear understanding of the possible shapes her research might take. This instance of "planning" did not reflect a great amount of independent agency; rather, it suggested that Sarah adopted her supervisor's perceptions of the project. This exemplifies how Sarah's research thinking was strongly influenced by the supervisor as she set out the next steps in her project – completing the

literature review and deciding the feasibility of possible research designs aided by others with expertise in the field.

In addition to planning, there were also instances where Sarah demonstrated some degree of self-assessment – using feedback to confirm or reject her provisional assessment of her work; that is, to recognise issues within her writing and research. As we have argued, such self-assessment is indicative of being more agentive, and thus provides evidence of scholarly growth. In the example below, Sarah discussed feedback on her literature review.

*The section about...[the] UK...using evidences in history, national economic[s] in UK, I knew before that it was something that was missed. So I knew before sending it, it was something missed.... And even like on the part on ICT...the idea of using some policy documents was in my mind. I was not really aware of how to handle them.... I told even to my supervisor some of the points were actually even my points. So...I found some of the main...problems.*

Here, Sarah recognised a potential problem in her work, but had not found a way to deal with it. She did, however, note that her supervisor's comments highlighted the issues she had conditionally identified on her own, reflecting a sense of growth. In this way, supervisor feedback verified Sarah's ability to self-assess her work, increasing confidence in her judgement, and thereby potentially her independence in thinking about her research. While Isabelle was already comfortable with self-assessment and had a well-developed scholarly identity, Sarah needed supervisor feedback to guide her through the process and aid her in learning to self-assess and become confident in her judgements.

Sarah did not refer to any interpersonal networking beyond the relationships suggested by her supervisors (librarians, other professors, etc.), and built her inter-textual networks primarily from supervisor-suggested literature. In other words, unlike Isabelle, she did not draw on a range of institutional resources. Sarah generally requested confirmatory feedback from her supervisors, wanting to know “whether [the paper] was okay or not”, and sometimes requested feedback when she was “stuck”, recognising a problem but unsure how to address it. In this way, supervisors were clearly instrumental in shaping the direction of Sarah’s research. Yet, in choosing to follow their suggestions, Sarah began to develop her scholarly identity by gaining confidence in her research thinking, and to move towards positioning herself differently from others.

Both participants, who were at the same point in their doctoral degrees, grew in confidence and research knowledge over the course of this project by engaging with supervisor feedback and revising their transfer papers, while demonstrating differing patterns of agency and scholarly growth. When this study began, Sarah had a brief outline of her literature review, which developed into a full draft where she started to identify a gap in the literature that her research would fill. Though Isabelle started with a nearly completed draft of her transfer, her research questions evolved and she solidified her methodological approach, which manifested in assertive, clear statements about what the research purpose was and how the study would be conducted. For the two participants, supervisor feedback played different roles. Still, feedback was as much about advancing their research thinking and developing their confidence as independent researchers as it was about improving their transfer papers.

Doctoral students enter the program with varying levels of experience, confidence and agency, yet are meant to exit as independent researchers. The results of this study suggest that these earlier individual histories affect students' perceptions of feedback, and subsequently the extent to which they are agentive within the three strands of identity-trajectory, with agency acting as both a vehicle for identity development and an indicator of the student's present sense of scholarly identity. Table 2 summarises this interplay between experience, agency and the strands of identity-trajectory.

Table 2. Scholarly growth via identity-trajectory

|                        | <b>Isabelle</b>  | <b>Sarah</b>   |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Agency                 | Acted independently; queried supervisor feedback                     | Depended on supervisor feedback; viewed supervisor as expert   |
| Past experience        | Positive view of feedback independent of identity                    | Previous negative view of feedback                             |
| Institutional          | Assessed and critiqued supervisor feedback                           | Used supervisor feedback to make "corrections"                 |
| Intellectual           | Clear vision allowed for argument against taking up certain feedback | General vision for project but not yet clear how to execute it |
| Inter-personal network | Approached peers and drew on their critiques                         | No evidence of feedback-seeking beyond supervisors             |
| Inter-textual network  | Used both suggestions from supervisor and own self-selected readings | Used suggestions from supervisor                               |

In summary, two major findings emerged from the analysis. First, the results suggest that the extent to which participants were agentive in seeking, evaluating and using feedback was related to their previous experiences with feedback, reflecting the emotional nature of the writing process and the importance of individual histories in shaping students' perspectives, aligning in part with previous work (Can & Walker 2011; Caffarella & Barnett 2010). This, in turn, influenced the second finding: that agency is a vehicle for identity development as represented in the extent of a student's seeking and critically engaging with feedback and self-assessing work to clarify research thinking in revisions of text (see also Murakami-Ramalho 2011; Lieff et al. 2012). In other words, each student's sense of growing scholarly identity was reflected in the extent to which she was agentive in engaging with feedback. Likewise, the variation in agentive responses to feedback and revisions of their transfer papers revealed differences in the two participants' growing scholarly identities: greater confidence and independence in research thinking, and an ability to position their contribution to the field in relation to others. In other words, the relationship is bidirectional – individuals need others' feedback to provide a sense of progress, but also learn to generate their own feedback in which they own their abilities and their research. Variations in response to feedback – the extent to which individuals are agentive in using/evaluating feedback—may serve as evidence of scholarly development (increased ownership of one's work and a greater understanding of academia). This process of scholarly growth was reflected in the interwoven strands of identity-trajectory. Both participants drew on the institutional resources of supervisor feedback and library resources in working to fulfill their institutional responsibility, expanded their inter-textual networks – and in one case drew on an interpersonal network – to advance the writing and revision of their transfer papers (their proposed intellectual contribution), thereby developing confidence as new scholars.

## **Limitations**

The small sample from the same discipline and university means that it is uncertain to what extent the findings would hold true in other cases. That said, the goal was to capture the variation that occurs in individual experience, which is common in both case studies and studies using narrative analysis (Cohen et al. 2013; Riessman 2008). Here, the sample of two provided the opportunity to delve into the participants' experiences at a detailed level that would have been impractical with large numbers of participants.

Second, the participants did not always submit their documents before interviews took place, so sometimes there was little opportunity to prepare questions pertaining to their revisions, which meant asking follow-up questions at subsequent interviews when memory may have been more fallible. Further, because the supervisor feedback was principally in the form of student notes, there is uncertainty as to the accuracy of the notes, though not the students' interpretation of supervisor comments.

Third, it is possible that the participants received informal feedback in conversation or email that was not captured as part of this study. Finally, a number of factors may affect how graduate students perceive feedback and the research process, particularly supervision styles and supervisory relationships (Deuchar 2008; de Klejin et al. 2012). However, for the purposes of this study, the focus was on variations in students' responses to feedback.

## **Suggestions for practice and further research**

The results of this research offer several practical implications. First, supervisors should be aware of how they deliver critical comments, particularly to students who may not appear confident in their work. Second, because the results suggest that student agency plays an important role in advancing research thinking and scholarly identity, supervisors may also encourage new graduate students to seek multiple sources of feedback, and openly discuss their research concerns as well as comments or suggestions that they disagree with or have questions about. Such exercises might advance agentive behavior and help students to solidify their vision for the research, and allow them to practice justifying and explaining their projects while interacting with all three threads of identity-trajectory. Students who exhibit less agency or less confidence in their work may be in the early stages of developing scholarly identity, and could benefit from deeper discussion on research design and research purpose to flesh out their ideas and enhance their understanding of the possible forms their projects might take. While feedback on language use and the requirements for the transfer paper or thesis are useful, feedback that asks students to evaluate their arguments and think about their research in different ways may be even more important in helping them gain knowledge and establish themselves as strong researchers. Further, Isabelle's experience as a writing instructor and subsequent understanding of feedback and agentive involvement in the writing process suggest that all students may benefit from practicing giving and receiving feedback in various settings, including peer writing groups.

Additional research is needed to investigate how doctoral students respond to feedback in practice, focusing on their decision-making processes and the extent to which they effectively critique feedback. Research on developing the transfer paper (thesis proposal) in other disciplines, such as the humanities and natural sciences, may be useful in exploring how the nature of the discipline may affect the development of research thinking. For example, students in natural sciences are often immediately involved in research activities and publication opportunities as part of research

teams, while those in social sciences and humanities do the majority of their research alone (Delamont et al. 2000). Finally, a similar but longer study on how doctoral students use feedback in writing the thesis itself may be useful to track changes in scholarly identity over an extended period of time.

## Concluding remarks

This study used a longitudinal narrative approach to explore the *relationship between students' responses to supervisor feedback and the development of scholarly identity*. As the number of doctoral researchers continues to grow, it is important to maintain the quality of doctoral education and produce skilled scholars who will contribute to the body of knowledge. While the results confirm several previous findings on feedback use, they offer a more complex portrait of how past experience, perception and use of feedback are interrelated by examining degrees of agency.

Understood through the lens of identity-trajectory, the results reveal how each participant actively approached, though in different ways, the task of becoming an independent researcher – developing an identity as a scholar. The differences in agency (and sense of confidence) and growing identity highlight the value of a narrative approach (Elliott 2005). They reinforce the argument for future research on doctoral education to attend to individual variation (Pearson et al. 2011). Further, the lens of the three strands of identity-trajectory made it possible to analyze differences in development as a writer and scholar (McAlpine, Amundsen & Turner 2013): the intertwining of interpersonal and inter-textual networking and institutional resources with the advancement of intellectual contribution. Thus, an important contribution of this study lies in the use of agency as a means of capturing participants' varied decision-making processes, and their discussions and explanations of feedback as evidence of scholarly growth.

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